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ABSTRACT

Three methods of preposed questioning aimed at improving student comprehension of short stories were tested with a group of high school students. The methods were as follows: teacher-prepared, preposed questions, self-preposed questions (student-prepared), and schema self-preposed questions (embodying teacher-specified limitations within which students prepared questions). It was found that when teachers preposed questions (a popular technique), comprehension tended to be narrowed because students focused on passages related to the preposed questions; also, students attempted to satisfy the teacher's purpose in reading rather than their own. The student prepared self-preposed method tended to develop digressive, irrelevant questions, and encouraged attention only to question-related passages; this also limited comprehension. Best results were found with the schema self-preposed techniques in which students generated preposed, story-specific questions based on a schema of content-general questions. Questions were not only self-posed but were also likely to focus the reader's attention on passages answering questions that were pertinent and relevant to those asked on a content-valid comprehension test. (DF)

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# Active Comprehension of Short Stories

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A story, which, by definition, is "an account, either true or made up, intended to interest the reader," has intrinsic appear for young readers (8). In fact, a fairly recent survey indicated narration to be a most popular reading type among students (4). Yet, despite popularity, stories are sometimes difficult for students to comprehend. Of the teaching strategies focusing on improving comprehension, questioning prior to reading is one of the most effective (7). In this article, we will describe three methods of preposed questioning aimed at improving student comprehension of short stories. Examples of specific stories and questions are drawn from recent research we have conducted with high school students.[1]

## Teacher Preposed Questions

Of the three questioning techniques to be described, teacher preposed questions tend to be the most widely practiced. In fact, proponents of a well known teaching strategy known as the "Directed Reading Activity" view teacher preposed questions as an integral part of the teaching process because these questions direct the students to attend to the main ideas of the selection (2). Consider Ray Bradbury's short

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[1]The authors express their appreciation to the principal, English Department, and students of Norco High for their cooperation in the research project described in this article.

story "All Summer in a Day," which deals with the emotions of school children awaiting the sun's first appearance in seven years. Teacher A, focusing on the story's theme, might prepose these questions:

1. How is Margot different from the rest of the children?
2. How do the children react to Margot?
3. What does this story tell you about human nature?

Students, then, read the story to find answers to the teacher's questions about theme. Teacher B, stressing the story's structure, might prepose these questions:

1. Why is so much of the story devoted to dialog?
2. Does Margot play an active or passive part in the story's climax?
3. Do you agree or disagree that the story's ending is abrupt and unsatisfying?

Teacher C, emphasizing the author, might prepose these questions:

1. Is this story typical or atypical of Ray Bradbury's work?
2. Compare "All Summer in a Day" with another Ray Bradbury story you have read recently.
3. Why does Bradbury use science fiction settings to tell us about human nature?

After students read "All Summer in a Day," they engage in discussion, writing, or other creative activity that involves both direct and indirect use of the answers to the proposed questions. If the after-reading activities don't relate to the preposed questions, students will soon view preposed questions as a hollow ritual.

Self Preposed Questions

The problem with teacher preposed questions is that students read to satisfy the teacher's purpose, not to their own. Recent research suggests that no two students approach a story with identical experiences; as a result, what is "read into the story" varies (6). Alan Purves (5) puts it this way:

> . . . Scientific research shows that there are a minimum of 500,000,000,000 possible different responses to a given text. That's at least 200 different responses for everybody in the world! (p. 42)

If each student is unique, it is conceivable that teacher preposed questions will have varying degrees of success within the classroom because they will fit by chance some students' purposes but not other students'. A useful alternative to make sure that students will be reading to satisfy their own purpose is to have students read to find answers to their own questions.

In a recently completed study, we taught an experimental group of high school students to generate their own questions about a series of short stories, as a means of improving their comprehension (3). The procedure was this: (1) After receiving background information on the story, students read the first two or three paragraphs; (2) at this point, we asked them to write out several questions that they wanted the story to answer; (3) they finished the story, reading to find answers to their questions. In the daily quizzes they took following the reading of each story, the students who generated their own questions scored consistently higher than the control group of students, who read the same stories, but who used teacher preposed questions.

In this paper, we shall present only the instructional aspects of this study, specifically the questions students posed and the use of schema generated questions for guiding student's self-posed questions.

The variety of student preposed questions is wide. Below is a partial list of questions that students generated after reading the first two paragraphs of Hernando Tellez' "Just Lather, That's All," a tense interior monolog of a barber as he shaves a revolutionary, the town's cruel military dictator:

| Student | Sample Question |
|---|---|
| 1 | Who was the man that came in (to the barber shop)? |
| 2 | What country are they in? |
| 3 | Was the barber scared? |
| 4 | Why did he (the general) take off the bullet-studded belt? |
| 5 | The barber's fear is justified by what? |
| 6 | Who is the guy who is giving the shave? |
| 7 | What did the man (the general) mean to him (the barber) in his life? |
| 8 | Why does the man (the general) have a gun holster on? |
| 9 | Why did he (the barber) test the razor on his thumb? |
| 10 | Where are they (the barber and the general)? |
| 11 | What happened before that day with the barber and the other man? |

Sometimes student-posed questions focus on issues not relevant to the story. For instance, Joseph Petracca's "Four Eyes" concerns a sixth-grade boy caught in a conflict between his teacher, who thinks he needs eye glasses, and his father, who's determined he won't get them. Yet,

for some reason, most of the students focused their questions on the personality of the teacher or on her seating arrangement, rather than on the boy's nearsightedness. Interestingly enough, these students' quiz scores were lowest on "Four Eyes," than on any other story lesson. Thus, if students prepose irrelevant questions, the result may be low comprehension.

Schema/Self-Preposed Questions

With teacher-posed questions being restrictive and student-posed questions potentially digressive, a suitable mid-ground would be schema/self-posed questions. A schema consists of knowledge structures for the organization and meaning of stories. It can be used as a systematic way of examining a piece of text, in this case, a short story and as a means of organizing and storing information within long term memory. A schema can serve to define the limits within which students are taught to ask questions.

Schema for controlled vignettes and simple fables have been developed and tested (6, 1). However, we had to develop our own schema to deal with longer and more complex narrative texts, such as a short story. A short story is constructed in a way that fits a problem-solving type of schema. A leading character wants to accomplish something, a goal (G). Enroute to the goal, the character confronts obstacle 1, which the character overcomes, is defeated by, or is forced to redirect to an alternate goal. Obstacle 2, 3, and up to the last obstacle present the same problems to the character. When all obstacles are overcome, the character reaches the goal. The outcome of a story

eventually occurs when the character is defeated or is successful. The theme of a story is what the author tells us about life as projected by the interaction of the character, the goals, and the outcome.

Given this basic schema for short stories, students can be taught an active way to read and interpret any given story, by using schema-general questions to generate story specific questions. Students had no difficulty in using this strategy. For example, from the following schema-general questions, students generated the adjacent story-specific questions:

| Schema-General Questions | Story-Specific Questions |
|---|---|
| 1. Who is the leading character? | 1. Is this story going to be more about the general or about the barber? |
| 2. What is the leading character trying to accomplish in this story? | 2. Will the barber kill the general with the razor? |
| 3. What stands in the way of the leading character reaching the desired goal? | 3. Will the general be a willing victim? |

What follows is a complete list of schema-general questions which teachers can use as they teach students to generate story-specific preposed questions:

Schema-General Questions

1. The leading character
   a. Who is the leading character?
   b. What action does the character initiate?
   c. What do you learn about this character from this action?
2. The goal
   a. What does this leading character appear to be striving for?
   b. What do you learn about the chacter from the nature of his goal?
   c. What course of action does the character take to reach the goal?
   d. What do you learn about the character from the course of action chosen?

3. The obstacles

   a. What is the <u>first</u> obstacle the character encounters?

      1. How does the character deal with this obstacle?
      2. Does the character alter the goal because of this obstacle? How?
      3. What do you learn about the character from the way he deals with the obstacle?

   b. What is the final obstacle the character encounters?

      1. How does the character deal with this obstacle?
      2. Does the character alter the goal because of this obstacle? How?
      3. What do you learn about the character from the way he deals with the obstacle?

4. The outcome

   a. Does the character reach his original goal or his revised goal or no goal?
   b. If the character is successful, what helped him most?

      1. Forces within his control. Which ones?
      2. Forces outside his control. Which ones?

   c. If the character is defeated, what hindered him most?

      1. Forces within his control which he failed to deal with?
      2. Forces outside his control which he was unable to deal with?

5. The theme

   a. This story basically shows man's struggle with

      1. Himself
      2. Nature
      3. Other people

## Conclusion

Although stories make popular reading, students experience difficulty comprehending some stories whether they respond to questions preposed by the teacher or by themselves. When teachers prepose questions that students are to read to answer, which is a popular and somewhat

successful teaching technique, comprehension tends to be narrowed because the students focus on passages related to the preposed questions. Also, students try satisfying the teacher's purpose in reading, not their own. However, when students are allowed to prepose their own questions and read to satisfy their own purposes, they tend to ask some questions that are digressive and irrelevant and attend only to question-related passages. Consequently, they also limit their comprehension. However, when students are taught to generate preposed story-specific questions based on a schema of content-general questions, the questions are not only self-posed but they are also likely to focus the reader's attention on passages which answer questions that are pertinent and relevant to those asked on a content-valid comprehension test; under these conditions, comprehension scores are likely to be the highest.

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